



Agenda 5.11

Council

CNL(01)61

Control Of Seals As Predators Of Salmon in the European Union

(Tabled by the European Union)

CONTROL OF SEALS AS PREDATORS OF SALMON IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Within the European Union, protection for seals is afforded by their inclusion in Annex V of the EU Habitats Directive. A number of Special Areas of Conservation have been designated for seals throughout the member states.

Ireland

Grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) and common or Harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) are protected under Ireland's Wildlife Act. However, provision is made under this Act to allow licensed fishermen, owners of salmon rod fisheries and staff of state and semi-state agencies involved in the management or protection of fisheries resources to apply for a limiting licence to shoot seals which are interfering with fishing gears or fishery operation.

UK (England and Wales) and UK (Scotland)

Grey seals and common seals are protected under the terms of the Conservation of Seals Act 1970. This Act prohibits the killing of seals other than by the use of a rifle with ammunition having a muzzle energy of not less than 600 ft-lbs (813.5 joules) and a bullet weighing not less than 45 grains (15.4 grams). It also provides for annual close times (1 September to 31 December for grey seals and 1 June to 31 August for common seals) when it is an offence to kill seals. It is not an offence to kill a seal, however, if this is done to prevent it causing damage to a fishing net or tackle, or to any fish in such a net, provided that the seal is in the vicinity of the net or tackle.

A licence may be issued to permit the killing of seals to prevent damage to fisheries, to reduce a population surplus of seals for management purposes, or to use a population surplus as a resource. The licence imposes restrictions on the type of firearm that can be used to shoot seals, which were intended to ensure that the most humane method of killing is used.

UK (Northern Ireland)

In Northern Ireland, persons holding salmon netting licences are permitted to apply control measures to prevent interference by seals to catches and gear. Such measures can include killing by means of high velocity firearm. Licences may be issued under the provisions of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985.

Sweden

The hunting of seals along the Swedish west coast has been banned since 1967 and 12 seal sanctuaries have been established. However, according to the former HELCOM environment committee, Sweden may issue permits for the capture and/or killing of seals for the purposes of research on the effects of removing seals from areas where extensive damage is being caused to fishing gears. The issue of permits to remove individual animals that are causing problems to fishing gears is possible only in very exceptional circumstances.

Denmark

The killing of seals is prohibited in Denmark. In exceptional cases, permits may be issued to shoot seals that are causing particular damage to fisheries, but very few such licences have been issued and none in respect of salmon fisheries.

New Initiatives

One of the major difficulties in assessing the impact of seals as predators of salmon has been the difficulty in assessing the contribution of salmonids to seal diet.

In the UK, the Atlantic Salmon Trust is currently supporting a project to validate the use of DNA techniques to identify soft tissue salmonid remains in seal faeces, and to differentiate between salmon and sea trout tissues. It is hoped that this will lead to better quantitative assessments of seal diet and predation levels.

This work will be carried out in Scotland by the Fisheries Research Services Freshwater Laboratory and the Cromarty Field Station of the University of Aberdeen. The facilities of the Sea Mammal Research Unit at St Andrews University will also be used. A progress report will be available in Spring 2002, with the final report being completed by October 2002.